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# **Cultural Intelligence and Leadership Style in the Education Sector**

## **A study of school leaders' ability to adapt their leadership style in the Abu Dhabi Education Sector**

### **Abstract**

**Purpose** –Schools in UAE are multicultural in nature. In this context, cultural intelligence (CQ) is a tool, which can increase an individual's ability to interact with people outside his/her culture. The purpose of this paper is to explore the perceptions *of the school leaders regarding the key influences of Cultural intelligence on their ability to adapt their leadership style in the Abu Dhabi Education Sector.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – An Extensive review of literature was carried out to acknowledge the cultural intelligence and leadership style adaptability concepts. This research has adopted a qualitative method of inquiry. Data for the study has been collected from three focus groups with 14 Schools Leaders in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi.

**Findings** – This pilot study reveals that cultural intelligence has some influence on the school leaders' ability to adapt their leadership style within a diverse work environment. This influence is complex in nature and multiple factors have been identified.

**Research limitations/implications** –The main limitations of this study are associated with the small sample size. Regarding the implications, while this study was conducted in a UAE cultural context, it can be extended to other Gulf countries. Future research should prompt educational leaders, administrators, students, and research academics to further consider the impact of cultural intelligence on leadership style.

**Practical implications** – The study contributes toward cultural intelligence literature. Schools should provide cultural training to managers before appointing them to leadership positions, which helps in understanding the culture which they are going to operate in, and effectively manage their drives, workforce, students and the community.

**Originality/value** – The paper highlights six core factors that influence the ability of school leaders to adapt their leadership style in culturally diverse environments. These preliminary factors need to be examined further to validate the dimensions of leadership adaptability in

various contexts.

**Keywords** - Cultural intelligence, Leadership styles, Leadership adaptability, UAE culture, UAE education sector, Abu Dhabi.

## **Introduction**

Globalization is a complex issue with social, political, and economic implications that go beyond individual countries and societies. It has prompted the need for experiences and skills in relation to working in culturally diverse settings as the cultural composition of work teams can have both positive and negative impacts (Ng et al, 2011). Hence, there is a strong demand for leaders who have the necessary skills required to lead culturally diversified teams (Groves & Feyerherm, 2011; Ang et al, 2011).

Cultural Intelligence (CQ) is one such construct which is “motivated by the practicality of globalization in the workplace” and it is a measure of an individual’s capability to function and manage effectively in culturally diverse settings (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008). In particular, educational institutions can be considered to be a microcosm of the globalization that is occurring throughout the world (Keung and Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2013). The Abu Dhabi education sector is culturally diverse and is reflective of the multinational nature of the population. Educational leaders who recognize the importance and value of Cultural Intelligence (CQ) can benefit from cultural differences by using CQ as a “strategic and competitive tool in order to help them achieve organizational goals” (Mahdi et al, 2012).

Tying together the concepts of cultural intelligence, leadership and leadership style adaptability, the ultimate aim of this research paper is to explore how cultural intelligence influences the school leaders’ ability to adapt their leadership style in the Abu Dhabi Education Sector. The first section highlights the background of this research - which is cultural intelligence in a UAE context. The following section reviews the literature

surrounding CQ and leadership. Theoretical Framework relevant to Cultural intelligence and Leadership Style Adaptability has been presented in the subsequent section. The next section presented research and methodological issues adopted for this research. Results of empirical findings and discussion were presented before concluding the paper.

### **Relevance of cultural intelligence in the UAE context**

No matter where a business organization is located in the world, the work environment is becoming increasingly more diverse. It is also the case that some individuals are more effective than others when working in multicultural environments (Crowne, 2008). Organizations that understand this dynamic often require their workers to have effective communication skills, thereby achieving more positive outcomes in multicultural situations.

The name “Middle East” suggests that Arabia is in the centre of two broad world cultures, at the crossroads of the West (the Americas and Europe) and the East (Asia). The United Arab Emirates is an international business environment and the trend of globalization is broadening as it becomes the hub for international business in many sectors, most importantly alternative energy, finance, trade, and tourism (global.atradius.com, 2014).

The Abu Dhabi education sector is culturally diverse and is reflective of the multinational nature of the population. The population of the UAE in 2010, as per census estimates, was 7,316,073. Of this number only 947,997 were UAE Nationals. The rest, nearly 87% are expatriates mainly coming from Asia, UK, USA and other Arab countries (UAE National Bureau of Statistics, 2010). In 2013, it was estimated by the Minister of

Economy that there were approximately 202 different nationalities of people were living and working in the UAE (Gulf News; September 13, 2013). This has resulted in the interaction of people with diverse language, customs and ethnic backgrounds. While diversity has been shown to have a number of benefits, including enhanced employee creativity and competence, it can also lead to problems such as miscommunication, dysfunctional adaptation behaviors and the creation of barriers, thereby reducing the positive aspects that diversity can bring (Al Jenaibi, 2012).

#### *Abu Dhabi Education Sector*

Education institutions in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi are a prime example of the globalization that is occurring throughout the world. Indeed, the Abu Dhabi education sector is described in literature as being “a fascinating case in terms of the globalization of education” - due to an increase in the meshing of social, economic and cultural integration within current educational practice and policy (Kirk, 2010). The demographic of students and teachers vary greatly between the private and public sectors and there are various challenges relating to diversity - such as language barriers, cultural and religious differences and gender imbalances. According to the Abu Dhabi statistics center, in 2014, the educational district consisted of 256 public schools (127,698 students) and 188 private schools (223,803 students from different countries):

<b>Description</b>	<b>Number of Schools</b>	<b>Number of Teachers</b>	<b>Number of Students</b>
Public Schools	256	11,288	127,698
Private Schools	188	12,283	223,803
<b>Total</b>	<b>444</b>	<b>23,571</b>	<b>351,501</b>

*Table 1: Number of schools, teachers and students in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi (Abu Dhabi Statistics Centre, 2014 – 2015)*

<b>Description</b>	<b>Number of Teachers - Public</b>	<b>Number of Teachers – Private</b>
UAE Nationals	4,234	49
Non – UAE Nationals	7,054	12,234
<b>Total</b>	<b>11,288</b>	<b>12,283</b>

*Table 2: Number of UAE National and Non-UAE nationals teachers in both public and private schools in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi (Abu Dhabi Statistics Centre, 2014 – 2015)*

The Abu Dhabi education sector is relatively young as compared to other systems worldwide. Historically, very few countries have experienced the huge shift in income and resulting development that has been experienced in the Abu Dhabi. In less than 40 years the UAE has developed a public national education system that is similar to what western systems have achieved in over 100 years (Kirk, 2010). As a result, the UAE has had to quickly develop an education system that can withstand the rate of development of the country. This has led to the adoption of many foreign models and curriculums, giving the students more choice while also meeting the demand for capacity quickly (Kirk, 2010). However, while this has helped in the short term, the Abu Dhabi education system is now undergoing reform with the ultimate aim of creating an indigenous education model that is more tailored to the diverse needs of the country.

## **Review of literature**

### *Cultural Intelligence*

Cultural Intelligence (CQ) is one tool or competence that could help educational leaders deal with diversity in the workplace. The fact that some people can function more effectively than others in a multicultural environment is the driving force behind the

development of a concept called Cultural Intelligence (CQ). Introduced in 2003 by Earley and Ang, CQ was conceived during a time of “*unprecedented globalisation and interconnectedness*” (Ang et al, 2011). CQ is defined as “*a person’s capability to function effectively in intercultural environments*” (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008). It refers to a general set of capabilities that help individuals become more effective across different multicultural situations and therefore is not specific to one particular culture or context (Ang et al, 2014). The origins of CQ can be found in Intelligence Theory. Intelligence is defined by Sternberg and Detterman (1986) as the “*capability to adapt effectively to the environment*”. Earley and Ang (2003) used this idea but extended it so that it would be specific to a cultural context. They also utilised Sternberg and Dettermans, (1986) Multiple loci of intelligence theory which proposes that intelligence is related to different loci within the body, such as “biology, cognition, motivation and behavior” (Ang et al, 2014). ‘Biology’ refers to the interaction between structural and process aspects of the brain (Ang et al, 2014). ‘Cognition’ refers to both cognitive and metacognitive process or, in other words, a person’s perception of their own and others knowledge (Ang et al, 2014). ‘Motivation’ refers to the cognitive processes of drive and choice (Ang et al, 2014) and ‘Behavioral’ refers to the range of actions a person uses, such as motor skills, verbal and nonverbal actions (Van Dyne et al, 2012). CQ is therefore considered to be a multidimensional concept that includes metacognitive, cognitive, motivational and behavioral dimensions (Earley and Ang, 2003).

*Metacognitive CQ* is related to an individual’s consciousness and awareness during interactions with those who have different cultural backgrounds and involves “*higher*



*order cognitive processes*” (Ang et al, 2011). *Cognitive CQ* is an individual’s cultural knowledge of norms and practices that exist in different cultural settings (Van Dyne et al, 2009). It includes knowledge about cultural universals and cultural differences and is acquired from education and experiences in different cultural settings (Ang et al, 2011). *Motivational CQ* is an individual’s capability to direct effort and energy towards understanding cultural differences and relies on having intrinsic motivation and an interest in multicultural settings (Van Dyne et al, 2009). *Behavioral CQ* is an individual’s capability to demonstrate suitable verbal and non-verbal actions during interactions in a multicultural setting (Ang et al, 2011).

#### Outcomes of CQ

The Empirical research on CQ has been increasing since its introduction in 2003. From the literature, it is evident that there are a number of individual outcomes that have been linked to cultural intelligence and which have significant relevance to individuals working in culturally diverse environments (Ang et al, 2011).

It has been highlighted that cultural intelligence in general is positively related to *enhanced task performance*. Moreover, it was found that the metacognitive and behavioural components of cultural intelligence were particularly significant when it came to task performance (Ang et al., 2007; Garza & Egri, 2010; Rose, Ramalu, Uli, & Kumar, 2010). It has also been demonstrated in the literature that cultural intelligence facilitates the making of *effective cultural judgments and decisions* (Ang et al., 2007; Mannor, 2008). In particular metacognitive CQ and cognitive CQ predicted cultural judgment and decision-making (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2006; Ang et al.,

2007; Mannor, 2008). In regards to *multicultural team effectiveness*, research indicates that high metacognitive, cognitive and behavioural cultural intelligence encourages interpersonal trust in multicultural teams (Moynihan, Peterson, & Earley, 2008; Gregory, Prifling, & Beck, 2009; Rockstuhl & Ng, 2008; Ang et al, 2007). In regards to intercultural negotiation, research indicates that culturally intelligent individuals are more likely to be cooperative in nature have high cognitive motivation which results in a more effective negotiation process and ultimately better outcomes (Imai & Gelfand, 2010). In regards to *organisational innovation* there is a proven link between cognitive and behavioural cultural intelligence and the rate of organisational innovation. Being cognitively culturally intelligent enables individuals to identify the similarities and differences between cultures. This capability can facilitate organizational innovations in a culturally sensitive way (Elenkov & Manev, 2009). *Cross cultural adjustment* is also a documented outcome of CQ. It is related to the level of psychological comfort and familiarity an individual has with their new cultural environment (Ang et al, 2014). Studies found in the literature indicate that motivational and behavioural cultural intelligence are both positively related to cross cultural adjustment (Ang et al., 2007; Dagher, 2010; Ramalu et al., 2010; Templer et al., 2006). There are many other positive outcomes of CQ in the literature and indeed the authors of the concept call for further studies to “*increase our understanding of correlates, predictors, consequences, and moderators in the nomological network of CQ*” (Ang et al, 2011).

## **Leadership**

A review of the literature shows that extensive efforts have been made to try and describe leadership. However, many researchers are in consensus that leadership is a process, involves influence, occurs in groups, and involves a set of common goals (Northouse, 2013). Therefore, for the purpose of this research, the definition put forward by Northouse (2013) will be utilized. This states, “*Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal*”.

### Leadership Styles and Behaviors

Over the past decade, theories of charismatic, transformation and visionary leadership have dominated much of the practitioner and academic literature on leadership. These theories examine the behaviours of leaders who are able to evoke the confidence and support of their followers, which often leads to exceptional productivity and satisfaction. Leadership has been theoretically conceptualized in terms of traits, skills, styles, contingency and situational approaches in the academic literature. Furthermore, the concepts of transactional vs. transformational leadership, developed by Burns in 1980's, and then refined by Bass (1985), is currently the most cited comprehensive theory of leadership that encompasses a range of leadership behaviours (Bass, 1985; Bass and Avolio, 1994, Yukl, 1999). Leadership is conceptualized within behavioural domains that range from no leadership, termed laissez-faire, to transactional leadership, based upon rewards and punishments, to transformational leadership, based upon attributed and behavioural charisma (Bass and Avolio, 1994).

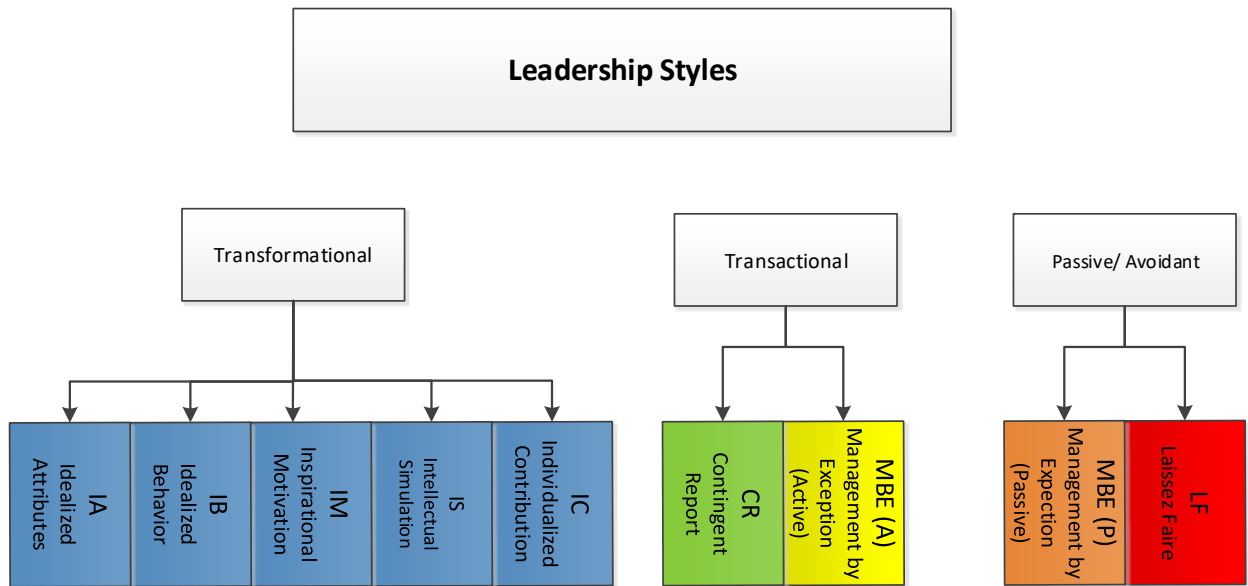


Figure 1: Avolio & Bass Leadership styles (Avolio & Bass, 2004)

Bass and Avolio (2003) argued that the rapid and continual pace of change that organisations today must cope with has driven the need for more flexibility and adaptive leadership. Those leaders defined as ‘Adaptive Leaders’ are those who can operate most effectively in changing environments. They can identify and make sense of the challenges they face, as well as those of their followers, and they are then able to respond appropriately (Bass and Avolio, 2003). This concept is grounded on the idea that adaptive leaders cooperate with their followers to devise innovative solutions to issues, while enabling them to cope with a wider variety of leadership responsibilities (Bass and Avolio, 2003; Bennis, 2001). Both Bass and Avolio have made clear demarcations between the different leadership styles, but have also noted *“that transformational leadership is not a substitute of transactional leadership rather it augments transactional leadership in achieving the goals of the leaders, associate, group and organization”* (Avolio & Bass, 2004).

The ability of leaders to adapt may be a key way to avoid failure in achieving the outcomes of leadership process. Adaptability or flexibility is an assumed process in many theoretical discussions but is rarely defined and operationalized in research. As a component of overall employee performance, Charbonnier-Voirin and Roussel (2012), view adaptive performance as the ability of an individual to change his or her behaviour to meet the demands of a new environment. The authors call for more studies (qualitative and quantitative) on the notion of adaptability, as the academic research on leadership style adaptability is very limited. They believe that current research and practice (on leadership style adaptability) have been hampered by a general lack of a widely available, psychometrically sound, multidimensional measure of adaptive performance that is applicable across a wide range of job contexts.

### *CQ and Leadership*

As CQ is described in the literature as being a critical leadership competency, it is important to investigate the literature on CQ and Leadership. Livermore (2010) and Mannor (2008), argue that CQ increases leader's abilities to assess culturally diverse work settings. Livermore (2010) goes further to state that leaders with advanced capabilities in CQ greatly contribute to leadership effectiveness and performance outcomes in culturally diverse teams.

There are a few studies in the literature that have investigated CQ and Leadership using both the qualitative and quantitative aspects. An important study carried out by Groves and Feyerherm (2011) concluded that CQ was positively related to leadership

performance in situations of high staff diversity while CQ was unrelated to leadership performance when the situation was less diverse. Another study by Rockstuhl et al, (2011) also demonstrated that CQ predicted cross border (working in different countries) leadership effectiveness as opposed to just general leadership effectiveness. This strengthens the argument that CQ is a unique intercultural capability. A study by Dean (2007) found that global leaders utilize metacognitive CQ in all their leadership processes. A further study carried out by Deng & Gibson (2008) also demonstrated that motivational CQ is an essential component for cross cultural leadership effectiveness (Ang et al, 2011). In terms of the effect of CQ on leadership styles, a study by Elankov and Manev (2009) highlighted that CQ ‘magnified the effects of visionary transformational leadership’.

This study is not focused on measuring leadership effectiveness, but there is sufficient argument in the literature to suggest that CQ is positively related to leadership effectiveness and the inference for the purposes of this study is that it is an important leadership attribute.

### *CQ and Educational Leadership*

The challenges faced by 21st century educational leaders are different from the past. Increased diversity of students within educational institutions indicates that leaders need to have cultural intelligence in addition to global awareness (Thomas, 2006). There are limited studies in the literature that address the nature of the relationship between CQ and educational leadership. One study, carried out by Mahdi et al (2012) investigated the

relationship between Cultural Intelligence and the Transformational Leadership style of Primary School Principals within Torbat-e- Heydaryeh in Iran. The statistical population of the research was all of the Principals in Torbat-e- Heydaryeh, and the subsidiary statistical population was all of the deputies and teachers of primary schools in Torbat-e- Heydaryeh. Consequently, 27 male managers and 23 female managers were randomly selected from the main statistical population (totaling 50 managers) utilising the whole numbering method, while 235 people were selected from the population of deputies and teachers. This study concluded that there was a positive relationship between CQ and the transformational leadership style. The authors go on to argue that in ethnically diverse educational institutions, it is essential that a leader has an effective leadership style and that this leadership style can be greatly supported by CQ. One limitation of this study is that it did not mention in detail the extent of diversity faced by the school leaders in Torbat – e –Heydaryeh and so parallels could not be drawn between the level of diversity and the CQ levels. This article was useful as it was the only article found that was similar to this proposed study in terms of the school principal setting and investigating the effect of CQ and leadership style.

In a recent study by Keung and Rockinson-Szarkiw (2013), which looked at international school leaders, it was found that there is a significant positive relationship between cultural intelligence and transformational leadership. They concluded that school leaders who have a higher level of cultural intelligence exhibit a higher level of transformational leadership style, which suggests that individuals with high-cultural intelligence are able to lead and to manage more effectively in multicultural environments. Behavioral cultural

intelligence and cognitive cultural intelligence were found to be the best predictors of transformational leadership.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### *Cultural intelligence and Leadership Style Adaptability*

Adaptive leadership was defined by Heifetz (2004) as the capacity to lead during difficult circumstances that necessitate a battle for survival in an environment that is shifting and changing. Leadership itself has been explained as the “activity of mobilising people to tackle the toughest problems and do the adaptive work necessary to achieve progress” (Heifetz et al., 2004).

Research has shown that there is positive relationship between adaptive leadership and cultural intelligence. In the CQ literature, Ang et al. (2007) concluded that individuals with high levels of metacognitive CQ and behavioural CQ are better able to understand situations characterised by diversity and therefore display the appropriate behaviours. This can be explained by the fact that individuals with high metacognitive CQ are more aware of the environment that they are in and individuals with high levels of behavioural CQ are able to adapt their behaviour to fit the cultural situation. Similarly, motivational and behavioral CQ is positively related to job performance (Ng et al., 2012; Kumar et al., 2008). Individuals with high levels of behavioural CQ will generally be better able to meet the expectations of others through moderating both their verbal and non-verbal behaviours (Kumar et al., 2008). As a result, misunderstandings should be reduced and



their own ability to adapt ought to be higher. These people will, therefore, be able to understand and interact with people from very different cultures.

Individuals possessing high levels of CQ have the capacity to gather and manipulate information, draw conclusions from it, and then react to the cultural cues of their host region with appropriate cognitive, emotional or behavioural actions (Earley and Ang, 2003). These intercultural competencies are also expected to enhance adaptability and minimise miscommunications of role expectations. CQ has a direct bearing on this adaptability as it helps individuals to adapt and adjust more straightforwardly to a host environment (Earley and Ang, 2003). Conversely, a negative relationship between behavioural and leadership adaptability is more likely to be observed where a leader resorts to mimicry, rather than utilising adaptive behaviours that are appropriate for different cultural settings. A culturally intelligent leader will demonstrate flexible behaviour that will help them adjust to any cross-cultural environment. The knowledge component of this is cognitive CQ, which positively relates to all the dimensions of adaptability. A leader with high cognitive CQ will be capable of identifying clues and insights about a culture, and using these observations to form an appropriate response. Leaders high in cultural intelligence are better able to adjust and adapt their leadership style in the host culture environment. Therefore, we can conclude that the characteristics of a culturally intelligent educational leader include: being able to better manage and minimise miscommunication, being able to adapt more straightforwardly to a host environment; being able to adjust their leadership style in the host culture environment, and being able to manage effectively in a diverse work environment.

Based on above arguments in the literature, this study aims to answer the below research

question:

*Research Question: What are the perceptions of the school leaders regarding the key influences of Cultural intelligence on their ability to adapt their leadership style?*

## **Research Design and Methodology**

### *Sample design and data collection*

Garcia and Gluesing (2013) argue that the way a researcher constructs the data collection has potential implications on the way in which the data is analysed. Specifically, qualitative data should allow for a theory to emerge. Furthermore, the research project can achieve its set objectives through effective analyses of the data collected. Krueger and Casey (2009) suggest that analysis of the data has to be “practical, systematic and verifiable”. The objective of this part of the research was to explore how cultural intelligence influences the school leaders’ ability to adapt their leadership style in the Abu Dhabi Education Sector. Therefore, the exploratory nature of the focus group technique calls for analysis of qualitative data collected through this medium, which requires categorisation prior to analysis (Saunders et al., 2012).

To obtain “new insights” (Robson, 2002) focus groups were chosen as the most appropriate method for understanding people and for extracting meanings in relation to the concepts under investigation. This method enabled the researcher to see and listen to what people think about leadership and cultural intelligence and adaptability, and how these concepts get utilised within an Abu Dhabi school setting. The focus group was used to identify how cultural intelligence influences the school leaders’ ability to adapt their leadership style in the Abu Dhabi Education Sector.

In case of this research, the whole population of school leaders in Abu Dhabi was offered an opportunity to self-select themselves to participate in focus group discussion on a particular date. The questions for the *semi-structured focus groups* were developed from a literature review on the subject of leadership, and particularly on the notion of

adaptability, as well as the literature on cultural intelligence. The main aim of the focus group discussions were to convene a broad sample of school principals from both public and private schools in Abu Dhabi, and to facilitate an informal debate relating to the concepts of leadership, adaptability, and cultural intelligence. Particular emphasis was placed on how the school principals felt that these concepts of leadership, adaptability, and cultural intelligence relate to one another from a practical point of view and in a multicultural situation.

Participants were asked to share their experiences in dealing with cultural situations. Open-ended questions were used: “What kind of challenges does cultural diversity among stakeholders create for you as leaders? In your experience, do leaders adapt their leadership style in the multicultural Educational Sector? Give examples. Describe an experience where you have encountered a conflict or challenging leadership situation as a result of cultural differences among stakeholders. Describe the actions you took in order to resolve this situation? Think of a time when you had the same situation/experience with two culturally different stakeholders. Did you handle both situations in a similar way or did you have to change your behaviour and actions in order to resolve each situation? Give reasons for your answers”.

Three focus group meetings were held in total: one with only private school leaders, another with only public school leaders, and finally a group with a mix of private and public school participants. The participant information is as follows:

<b>Name</b>	<b>Institution</b>	<b>Private / Public</b>	<b>National / Expat / Years of Experience</b>	<b>Principle / Deputy</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Rural / City</b>
Participant 1	Institution 1	Public	Expat / 15+	Principal	Female	Rural
Participant 2	Institution 2	Public	Expat / 10+	Deputy	Female	Rural
Participant 3	Institution 3	Public	Expat / 20+	Deputy	Female	Rural
Participant 4	Institution 4	Public	Expat / 15+	Principal	Female	City
Participant 5	Institution 5	Private	National / 10+	Principal	Female	City
Participant 6	Institution 6	Private	Expat / 10+	Principal	Female	City
Participant 7	Institution 7	Private	Expat / 20 +	Principal	Female	City
Participant 8	Institution 8	Public	Expat / 15+	Deputy	Male	City
Participant 9	Institution 9	Private	Expat / 10+	Principal	Male	City
Participant 10	Institution 10	Public	National / 15+	Principal	Male	City
Participant 11	Institution 11	Public	Expat / 15+	Principal	Male	Rural
Participant 12	Institution 12	Private	Expat / 15+	Principal	Female	City
Participant 13	Institution 13	Private	Expat / 10+	Principal	Female	City
Participant 14	Institution 14	Public	National / 15+	Deputy	Female	Rural

*Table 3: The three focus group participant demographic information.*

### **Focus Groups Details**

	<b>Focus Group 1</b>	<b>Focus Group 2</b>	<b>Focus Group 3</b>
<b>Duration</b>	1 hour 6 minutes	1 hour 19 minutes	58 minutes
<b>Number of participants</b>	4	5	5
<b>Type of school represented</b>	Public	Private	Mix of Public and Private schools

*Table 4: Focus groups duration, number of participant and type schools.*

Data was recorded using a digital audio recorder, and then discussion of each focus group discussion was transcribed. Subsequently, field notes were manually coded using the content analysis technique, and then re-coded having listened to the full recording. To ensure the reliability of the data, one has to be aware of the threats to reliability. The focus group discussions were facilitated in such a way that the discussion was directed very closely towards the set questions. Each group was also kept small in terms of the number of participants and so it was possible to control any bias due to their being dominant individuals in the group (Robson, 2011).

Regarding the coding of the focus groups, there are a number of approaches that could have been adopted within this research to analyse the data collected through the three focus groups. The researcher adopted traditional manual coding of the textual data, with each paragraph in the typed extended field notes being identified as a unit of analysis. Individual or multiple codes have been attached to each paragraph, which were derived from the secondary literature on the subjects of leadership and cultural intelligence. Through various interactions of this step, the researcher has gone through the three transcripts of the focus groups. The researcher then conducted initial searches for similarities and differences that emerged within and across the focus group transcripts, and the themes assigned to similar codes enabled the development of higher level codes, with various dimensions as sub-codes forming core themes.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data analysis, the theoretical themes emerging from the data were cross-checked by means of coding a selection of data by the researcher and an additional two individuals familiar with content analysis. The two individuals were briefed on the objectives of the study by the main researcher. There

were no particular discrepancies identified through the inter-coder reliability checks, and hence the coding undertaken by the main researcher was deemed as acceptable.

## **Results**

The section below presents the findings from the three focus groups:

### ***Findings from Focus Group 1 – Private Schools only***

The first core dimension discussed by this group is “*adaptability and flexibility*”, supported by the following quote: “There is no doubt that, as a leader, the higher your level of cultural intelligence, the more you will be flexible, adaptable, and be able to correlate and bring out the positive things among your staff”. Exploring the notion of “flexibility”, the focus group had a lengthy discussion about “*flexibility of thinking*”, which stems from the fact that it “depends on the person and personality, and that flexibility of thought is key. Being a transformational leader requires a high level of cognitive functioning, which results in the flexibility of thinking”. Additionally, the notion of “*tolerance for other cultures*” was discussed at length, specifically in the context of the UAE as a country that accepts expatriates from various cultures, resulting in higher levels of diversity amongst the workforce. Furthermore, “*receptivity*” towards other cultures emerged from this focus group, specifically in relation to “the UAE, which values its own culture and is open to accepting other people’s cultures”. However, this level of receptivity may be different for different types of leaders, and arguably the level of “*acceptance of*” or “*awareness towards*” other cultures is important for culture to play a role in organisations.

Learning the Arabic language has not been found to be a pre-requisite to successful adaptation in the UAE context, as participants discuss that “in the UAE people can survive and adapt without language”. This became an interesting dimension, as language is an important element of CQ. Hence, the “*non-importance (or Relevance) of language*” for adaptability in relation to the ability to speak Arabic was another important theme that emerged from the data. This could be explained by the diversity of the UAE population and also highlights the great importance of English as a universal language. Much of the discussion was spent on “expectations of behaviour” from others with various specific dimensions: “*high tolerance for ambiguity*”, “*openness*”, and “*respect*”, which represent the UAE dimensions of CQ.

Hence the core themes emerging from Focus Group 1 are: “*Flexibility of Thinking*”, “*Receptivity of Other Cultures*”, “*Expectations of Behaviour*” and “*Non-importance of Language*”.

### ***Findings form Focus Group 2 - Public Schools only***

One of the first things discussed by the Public School leaders was the “*geographical location*”. One school leader argued, “Our area (the Western Region) is different to the Abu Dhabi City and Al Ain City. Our area is very Bedouin and so the parents are different. Some parents still believe school is optional. There are problems with behaviour and homework compliance.”

At the outset, a lot of issues were raised in relation to the schools' governing body – Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC) - which has been created as an “*institutional environment*” and has an influence on the leadership style utilised within the schools. One Participant argued “having ADEC at the top tier, a lot of improvements cannot be put into practice. Some leaders have to go backwards and not forward due to this. As leaders, how much are you going to follow the ADEC guidelines? Are we going to modify our schools to fit our school needs or ADEC's needs, as there is usually a gap?”.

This group also had a discussion about the diversity of leadership styles, and explored the stereotypical “flexibility” of Western colleagues, and predominant “rigidity” of the Arab leaders. Furthermore, the discussion led to an understanding that “*consistency*” in leadership is important, but so is “*flexibility*” and the ability to find a “*compromise*” with various stakeholders. Being “*flexible and adaptable*” in understanding culture helps communicate to various stakeholders. Part of the discussion touched on the issue of language (or lack of), particularly “*communication*” with parents who may not speak English. This issue was explored through various lenses, including when this creates problems for leaders themselves when, due to language barriers, they have to sort out issues related to misunderstandings between children, parents and staff. Another issue was “*flexibility and adaptability*”, For example, one school leader argued “I had to adapt as a leader in terms of my assumptions as to what people know and understand and also in the way I communicate, I had to explain even things that for me would be obvious such as why we have parent teacher meetings and why the parents should attend. It took me a long time but that's what I had to do. I had to



change my style definitely.” Another school leader stated “Communication skills are problematic, teaching the parents English was also important at my school and improved the communication channels. Many parents came and enjoyed it.”

Looking at the core themes that emerged from the data, a lot of the discussion resonated the issues of “*flexibility*”, “*adaptability*”, and “*communication / language*”. However, a very important new core theme related to “*the influence of the institutional environment*” emerged that shapes leadership in public schools in the UAE.

Hence the core themes emerging from Focus Group 2 can be summarised as: “*Flexibility and Adaptability*”, “*Influence of the Institutional Environment*”, “*Rigidity versus Flexibility in Leadership Styles*” and “*Communication Problems*”.

### ***Findings from Focus Group 3 - A mix of Private and Public Schools***

The third focus group, with a mix of participants from public and private schools, raised similar concerns and discussed similar issues in relation to leadership and cultural intelligence in the UAE context. The notion of the influence of ADEC, the “*regulatory body*”, on schools - and the leaders of schools - was discussed throughout, and a lot of the discussion was centred on the fact that a “*geographical location*” creates a “*set of behaviours*” people have to follow within the country context. The discussion also involved talking about some new dimensions of “*adaptability*” to the fore, i.e. “*being sensitive*” and “*behaving per expectations of others*”, as one participant stated, “The Key

thing is to be sensitive and realise how precious people's culture is. Think about the bigger picture, there are many things that I could say that could cause problems. We have to be sensitive. There are expectations as to how you behave, address people".

Furthermore, the focus group concluded the discussion on the subject of leaders being able to "*accept change*", which again links in with the notion of "*adaptability*". One school leader stated "adaptation is very important for leaders in different cultures. What about personal skills and adaptation? Training will make you more self-confident. When you are insecure about your own self then you will close off and so will not adapt. Cultural training will make you accepting to change".

There are similarities between the themes that emerged from focus group 3 (mixed group), and previous Focus Groups. Hence, the core themes emerging from focus group 3 are: "*Adaptability*", "*Learning to be a leader through cultural experiences*", "*Influence of the geographical location*", "*Leader's behaviour patterns and expectations*" and "*Strategies of coping with diversity*".

### ***Key Factors of Leadership Adaptability***

During the focus group discussion, a number of themes were found to be more pertinent than others. These resonated with the practice of leadership style, and mainly the influence of CQ on their leadership style adaptability in the education sector. The core themes that were uncovered as a result of three focus group discussions are presented in the below table:

<p style="text-align: center;">“Leadership Adaptability” Factors –</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Core categories and Sub-categories</p>	
<p><i>Expectations of Leaders’ Behaviour</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Sensitivity</li> <li>▪ Ability to adapt</li> <li>▪ Behaving per other’s expectations</li> <li>▪ Consistency</li> </ul>	<p><i>Use of Cultural Strategies</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Managing stakeholder expectations</li> <li>▪ Learning to be a leader through cultural experiences</li> <li>▪ Shadowing Emirati leaders with Western leaders</li> <li>▪ Seeking compromise</li> </ul>
<p><i>Personal Characteristics of Leaders</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Openness</li> <li>▪ Respect</li> <li>▪ Being Sensitive</li> <li>▪ Receptive</li> <li>▪ High acceptance of ambiguity</li> <li>▪ Flexibility versus rigidity of character</li> </ul>	<p><i>Language / Communication</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Speaking Arabic</li> <li>▪ Speaking English</li> <li>▪ Lack of language skills of the leader</li> <li>▪ Lack of language skills of stakeholders</li> <li>▪ Non-importance of language</li> </ul>
<p><i>Flexibility And Adaptability</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Flexibility of thought</li> <li>▪ Tolerance for other cultures</li> <li>▪ Receptivity of other cultures</li> <li>▪ Acceptance of other cultures</li> <li>▪ Awareness of other cultures</li> </ul>	<p><i>Influence of Institutional Environment</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Geographical location</li> <li>▪ Differences in leadership styles required and enforced</li> <li>▪ Influence of ADEC on schools</li> <li>▪ Frequency and level of changes imposed by ADEC on Schools</li> </ul>

Table 5: The focus group results - core themes

## Discussion

The present research identifies a number of key factors that underpin the adaptability of leadership in a multicultural context. Some of these dimensions are inherent in leaders themselves (i.e. personal characteristics of leaders, language and communication ability) and behaviours which they exhibit (flexibility and adaptability, their use of cultural

strategies). Other factors are more context driven, as context imposes rules and behaviours on leaders (expectations of leader behaviour and influence of institutional environment).

The results of this research support the findings of Ang and Inkpen (2008), who similarly concluded that cultural intelligence is a critical leadership competency in a multicultural environment. This was further corroborated by Deng and Gibson (2009), where it was found that cultural intelligence was a crucial competency for effective leaders in a cross-cultural role. Dagher (2010) also argues that a leader who has rapidly adjusted to a multicultural environment will be better placed to adapt their leadership style, whereas an individual who has not adapted could need to devote greater cognitive resources to adaption, leaving fewer to focus on leadership style.

#### *Theoretical implications*

The present research has established the relative importance of cultural intelligence in school leaders through drawing a link with more classical constructs of leadership styles. Of course, the existing literature base for leadership styles is comparatively vast (Gardner et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2011). Nevertheless, this study adds to our understanding of the capacity of school leaders to effectively adapt their leadership style.

#### *Practical implications*

The practical implications of this research is important given that it has identified many factors which the school leaders themselves indicate effects their success in leading in a culturally diverse environment. The fact that different factors were identified across both

the public and private sectors highlights that there are specific challenges which exist in both sectors in relation to the handling of cultural diversity. Given that cultural intelligence influences a leader's ability to adapt their leadership style, it necessarily follows that cultural intelligence should be a focus in both the selection, and the training and development, of international school leaders (Templar et al., 2006; van Woerkom and de Reuver, 2009). Would all school leaders in Abu Dhabi benefit from Cultural intelligence training, prior to starting their job or at some point/s throughout their employment? Perhaps, an assessment of cultural intelligence should be a component of the selection process while hiring school leaders? The cultural Intelligence scale (CQS) developed by Ang et al (2004), is a 20 item, 4 factor, fully validated and respected instrument, that can easily be administered to assess baseline CQ levels. Specific feedback can also be generated on the areas of behavioural, motivational, cognitive and metacognitive CQ abilities

This would, in addition, ideally take into consideration technical competence, knowledge of the job, and interpersonal skills. However, it should be noted – by both leaders and those selecting future leaders – that the absence of the interpersonal competence needed for a cross-cultural assignment could be rectified by training (Ang, Van Dyne and Rockstuhl, (2014). So CQ is a competency that can be learned and developed by any leader through adequate training. While a leader may have a low CQ score, it is reassuring to know that this capability can be developed. However, it is important to measure the baseline CQ level so that any gaps can be identified and a personal development plan created for each school principal.

With cultural intelligence, it is important to develop a broad framework of understanding, skills, and behaviours, aimed at engaging with a culturally diverse working world. This is in preference to focusing only on specific knowledge or behaviours of a particular country or local culture (Early and Ang, 2003; Livermore, 2010). Therefore, it can be seen that the results of the present study support the assertion that current training be expanded to all four factors of cultural intelligence.

### **Limitations**

This study, in common with every other research study, is subject to some limitations. In the present case, a central obvious limitation is the relatively small size of the sample which created some constraints on the generalisation of the results produced in the analysis. It does not represent the views of all school principals and stakeholders in both the public and private school sectors and so this will also limit its reach. Furthermore, the limited scope of the study – solely on the emirate of Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates – raises some concerns about how representative the population is. This study can be considered to be a pilot study and so any conclusions drawn must be used with caution.

### **Future Study Direction**

It is recommended that future studies should increase the sample size to make sure that a more representative population is investigated. They should also seek to include a greater number of schools from across the entire country to improve overall understanding.

The next logical step would be to conduct a quantitative study using questionnaires methods to further investigate the perceptions of the school leaders regarding the key influences of Cultural intelligence on their ability to adapt their leadership style in the Abu Dhabi Education Sector. This could be carried out from both the leader and follower perspective.

The application of more objective methods (for example, peer assessments, direct observations, or 360-degree assessments) could also be utilised in the future to help provide converging evidence with the findings of the present pilot research. Future studies could also benefit from examining traits other than leadership skills that have an influence on cultural intelligence (CQ) – for example, teaching skills or the ability to speak multiple languages might also show a relationship to CQ. It is highly recommended that these fields are explored further.

## **Conclusion**

This pilot research has set out to explore the factors influencing the school leader's ability to adapt their leadership style in a multicultural context. Abu Dhabi school leaders' adaptability to different cultural environments has been influenced by six factors identified in this paper, some of which are specific to leaders' characteristics and practice and others driven by the context in which leadership takes place. This pilot research proposes that cultural intelligence could be an important tool to use during the selection, training, and professional development of these educational leaders.

Educational leadership research has, over time, lacked longevity of research foci (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2005), which leaves a significant area for future study. It is

observed that leadership style created a seismic shift in the concept of leadership, and consequently created a dramatic shift in the field of leadership studies (Antonakis et al., 2003; Bass, 1993; Hunt, 1999). Cultural intelligence, as a construct, has the potential to affect a similar transformation in the field of intercultural competency.

Kelley (1927) stated that cultural competence, as an area of study, suffered from being a ‘jingle and jangle fallacy’. That is, that constructs are labelled in similar ways, but are very different concepts; while others, conversely, have comparatively similar meanings but are labelled differently (Gelfand et al., 2008). It does, however, present distinctive positive attributes. While still a relatively new concept, it offers theoretical synthesis and coherence, and theoretical precision; it also identifies where cultural competencies are absent, and can link research between different disciplines (Ang et al., 2007; Gelfand et al., 2008).

Naturally, further empirical studies are still necessary to increase the weight of research on cultural intelligence to the impressive levels of that on leadership styles. That being the case, the present pilot research should prompt educational and general managers, administrators, students, and research academics to further consider the impact of cultural intelligence on their ability to adapt their leadership style.



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